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News Release

Stolen colonial painting returned to Mexico following binational effort ***Plundered artwork ultimately sold to San Diego Museum of Art***

SAN DIEGO — An 18th century colonial painting stolen from a church in central Mexico six years ago was officially handed over to Mexican authorities here this morning, capping a two-year repatriation effort involving Mexico, the United States Department of Justice, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, which depicts a scene from the Book of Genesis, was plundered from a church in San Juan Tepemasalco, Hidalgo in 2000. During the heist, thieves slashed the artwork from its frame, leaving tattered pieces of canvas behind. According to the legal paperwork that paved the way for the painting's return, the restored artwork was acquired by the San Diego Museum of Art (SDMA) later that year from a private art dealer for \$45,000.

"The recovery of this painting is another example of the fruitful cooperation that exists between law enforcement authorities of Mexico and the United States," said Consul General of Mexico in San Diego Luis Cabrera. "The government of Mexico conveys its gratitude to ICE, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Attorney's Office for the seizure, protection, and restitution of this painting of great historic and cultural value to Mexico."

In 2004, after tracking the stolen painting to San Diego, Mexican authorities sought the assistance of the U.S. government under the provisions of the binational treaties on Mutual Legal Assistance and Recovery and Return of Stolen Archaeological, Historical and Cultural Properties. The United States Attorney's Office in San Diego gathered evidence in the United States as requested by Mexican prosecutors, and negotiated a forfeiture consent judgment with the SDMA to secure the repatriation of the painting to Mexico.

United States Attorney Carol Lam stated, "We use every tool at our disposal to assist our treaty partners in recovering stolen cultural property that is smuggled across the border. This is another fine example of the cooperative efforts of U.S. and Mexican law enforcement authorities to enforce the rule of law and ensure that cultural property is protected."

In the consent judgment, the Museum voluntarily agreed to forfeit its interest and to return the stolen painting to ICE, which investigated the circumstances surrounding the painting's arrival in the United States and its subsequent sale to the SDMA.

"Returning this important artwork to Mexico is particularly gratifying," said Michael Unzueta, special agent in charge for the ICE office of investigations in San Diego. "This investigation serves as a warning to art smugglers worldwide - ICE is working with its law enforcement partners around the globe to pursue those who plunder priceless art and cultural artifacts. Works like this one are not some expendable commodity. They are treasures that hold an important place in our shared international culture."

At a news conference here this afternoon, U.S. and Mexican authorities posed with a copy of the stolen artwork. The actual painting was loaded into a shipping crate earlier today at SDMA and readied for transport to Mexico. After formally taking possession of the painting from the Museum, ICE released it to the Mexican government.

Painted in 1728 by an unknown Mexican artist, scholars believe *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* was used by Spanish missionaries attempting to convert Native Americans in Mexico and Latin America to Christianity.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.